

Under their skin



Leather's
impact on —

[Full leather report](#)
Under their skin:
Leather's impact on animals

February 2023

Other reports in the series:

Leather's impact on people
Leather's impact on the planet
A just transition beyond leather

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Under their skin

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While leather has been used in fashion for millennia, its production today is an ethical and environmental crisis. Today, over 1.4 billion cattle stand on once biodiverse land, confined to feedlots and in planted pasture systems until they are slaughtered for food and leather.

The skins of animals in leather supply chains are sourced as profitable co-products, in a global leather industry reportedly worth over \$394 billion USD in 2020.

While leather is made from the skins of a range of domesticated species including sheep, pigs and goats, as well as wild animals such as kangaroos, crocodiles and pythons, this report highlights the impacts of leather supply chains on exploited bovine animals like cattle and buffalo, to whom 67% of all skins used by the leather industry belong.

'Leather's impact on animals' is a report which exists as part of Collective Fashion Justice's 'Under their skin' series, highlighting the interconnected impacts of leather production on people, the planet and animals alike, as well as the opportunity for a just transition towards a fashion industry which uses more ethical and sustainable leather alternatives.

While at least some of the environmental impacts of leather production are increasingly acknowledged by the fashion industry, little relating to the impact of leather production on animals themselves is considered or reported on today. Therefore, this report highlights the plethora of standard practices in the industry which inevitably cause distress and suffering for bovine animals, some of which are summarised below:

- Cows are routinely and intentionally exempt from broader, global animal protection laws, allowing for the legal and routine mutilation of cattle by dehorning, castration, branding and so on, for economic reasons.
- A growing number of cows are confined to feedlots where stress, disease and injury risks increase and natural behaviours cannot be met, before being transported to slaughter.
- Transport by land and across seas are both stressful, and live export ships cause unacceptable suffering and cruelty to cattle, who often suffer severe heat stress, if not far worse outcomes.

→ Cattle are slaughtered following often ineffective stunning, with even 'best practice' slaughter resulting in distress for animals who recognise the similar distress of those further along the slaughter line than them, before they are hung upside down, shackled and bled out.

We also outline harms to animals exploited and killed for leather which relate to interconnected issues faced by people in and surrounding the leather supply chain, as well as the planet. These complex issues are explored in detail across our 'people' and 'planet' reports:

- Leather supply chains are complex and not transparent, with few brands able to share where the cows in their leather supply chains were raised or slaughtered. As a result, many animal welfare policies in the fashion industry are unable to result in any meaningful outcomes for cattle. This lack of transparency also hides the use of forced labour in leather supply chains, as well as deforestation and the denial of Indigenous land rights.
- The slaughter of cattle in leather supply chains is inherently violent, resulting in extrapolated

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harms impacting slaughterhouse workers themselves (who are more likely to face traumatic stress related to their killing work) and surrounding communities who face higher risks of domestic violence.

- Fashion industry efforts to improve the sustainability of leather often harm animals, and vice versa, as the industry is one which is inherently more inefficient and destructive than alternatives to it. For example, if all cattle were to be 'free-range' we would likely see an increase in deforestation, and yet as the fashion industry works to eliminate deforestation for growing leather production, more cattle are confined to feedlots where they mentally and physically suffer.

As the importance of total ethics fashion which prioritises humans, our fellow animals and the planet we share before profit is increasingly recognised, calls to move beyond leather are slowly becoming more widely embraced.

The vast number of interconnected and worthy reasons to move beyond the use of leather should be considered by fashion brands determined to secure their market position in a more sustainable and ethical fashion

future, as consumers demand responsibility from the industry:

- Lyst noted a year-on-year increase in searches for 'vegan leather' and 'eco vegan leather' from 2020, as well as a decline in searches for conventional 'leather'.
- FOUR PAWS commissioned polling across 12 markets shows that over one in ten people have decided to avoid all animal-derived materials in fashion, since the beginning of the pandemic.
- Growing consumer interest in sustainable, animal-friendly and fairly made fashion will be further explored in the final report in the 'Under their skin' series, which explores the opportunity for a just transition beyond animal-derived leather.

Cattle are recognised as sentient, capable of a wide range of emotions and cognitions. They enjoy playing, form strong social bonds, get excited when they learn, and show autonomy when fighting to escape slaughterhouses; kicking and even escaping. With so many more just and sustainable alternatives to leather available, it is time to move beyond the use of skins in fashion.

Considering all of the impacts of leather production explored in this report series, Collective Fashion Justice recommends that:

1. Citizen consumers should avoid all animal-derived leather, choosing to buy less and wear what they have, while supporting pre-loved clothing and brands which are producing genuinely responsible, total ethics fashion.
2. The fashion industry must set targets to phase its use of animal-derived leather out while communicating the importance of this. Many brands should be able to commit to a 50% reduction in such leather use by 2027, fully phasing out leather within the following decade.
3. Policy-makers should encourage more just and sustainable production through legislation, shifting subsidies away from harmful cattle rearing and leather production, while setting guidelines to limit ethics-washing which promotes materials such as leather as 'ethical', 'sustainable' or 'cruelty-free'. Fashion industry journalists should avoid green-washing and ethics-washing, too. ■

Under their skin: a report series on leather

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Under their skin

Introduction

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Introduction

Leather has been seen as an unshakably prominent and important aspect of the fashion industry and dressing for millennia.

The oldest intact leather shoe, uncovered by archaeologists in an Armenian cave, is over 5,500 years old, made from cow skin and predating the Pyramids of Giza by 1,000 years.¹ Since this shoe was made, plenty about the fashion industry has changed: today, over 1.4 billion cattle have been bred and stand on once biodiverse land until they are slaughtered for production purposes,² leather is now often coated with plastic or tanned with harsh, carcinogenic chemicals,^{3,4} while the ever-increasing scale of the fashion industry is utterly unsustainable: leather supply chains are highly industrialized, harmfully implicating many workers and surrounding communities, while making luxury and mainstream brands massive profits.⁵ At the same time, very little has changed: animals continue to be exploited and slaughtered for the production of shoes, clothes and other goods, and skins must be fleshed and altered to ensure they do not rot on our feet.

So many centuries later, as we finally come to grips with our responsibility to address not only a human-induced climate crisis, but an animal and social wellbeing crisis built on commodification and endless-growth capitalism, it is time to move beyond leather – a material produced by an industry disproportionately contributing to these serious troubles, compared to other international industries.⁶ Such a move would allow the fashion industry to better align with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) targets and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals such as 'clean water and sanitation' (6), 'reduced inequalities' (10), 'responsible consumption and production' (12), 'climate action' (13), 'life below water' (14) and 'life on land' (15).⁷

A human ability to destroy, shown so clearly in the fashion and leather industries, is remedied by a human capacity for innovation and progress. Today, numerous materials replicate many of the properties which made leather so useful to us, produced with a far smaller, less harmful impact on our planet and those living on it. Material innovation only continues to grow, and rapidly, proving the possibility of a total ethics fashion future, one which has evolved beyond the skins we benefited from using millennia ago.

In this report series, Collective Fashion Justice – aided by the work and support of organisations including the Center for Biological Diversity, FOUR PAWS, Material Innovation Initiative, Defend the Wild, Fashion Act Now, Faunalytics, and numerous experts contributing in their specialist areas – explores leather production and its place in the global agricultural and fashion industry, in addition to its impact on domestic and native species, the planet and our fellow humans. The series also outlines available and soon-to-be-available total ethics alternatives, and the practical possibilities of a just transition towards more communally and environmentally beneficial production – a step that is sorely needed in efforts to ensure collective liberation. Fashion cannot be truly sustainable unless it is ethical, too. We cannot sustain environmental degradation, nor injustices facing humans and non-humans.



Leather is not a by-product: the importance of addressing hides

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Despite common misconception, leather is not simply a worthless by-product, but a co-product.

While the leather industry likes to claim skins are tanned as a kind of waste reduction initiative, thus supposedly making leather neither cruel nor unsustainable, this is not the case.¹ Leather is a valuable co-product, with even meat and dairy industries labeling it as such.^{2,3}

The leather industry itself states the massive income losses involved in losing skin sales.⁴

Slaughterhouses purchase cattle from saleyards or farms, factoring in the likely profit gains from the flesh, skin and other parts of a cow's body. While some calves are raised specifically for their young, soft skins, even those cattle whose skins are considered a 'co-product' bring in profits for the animal-industrial complex

and fashion industry.⁵ On a micro-scale, individual slaughterhouses have reported multi-million dollar losses and the consideration of closing up when skins don't sell – often due to the rise in leather alternative popularity.⁶⁻⁸ At a macro level, the global leather goods market was valued at \$394 billion USD in 2020, with that number only increasing.⁹ Leather is for-profit business, and the entire leather supply chain, farms included, must be considered when exploring the environmental and ethical implications of fashion's use of it.

Valuing hides versus flesh

Global raw leather and hide exports were valued at over \$18.5 billion in 2019, with an expected rise of 9.46% by the end of 2022,¹⁰ while global beef exports sat at over \$45 billion USD in 2020. Leather can account for up to 26% of major slaughterhouses' earnings around the world.^{11,12}

In India, a leading leather footwear and garment producer, most exports by share go to the United

States and Europe.¹³ Here in India, the skins of bovine animals, including cattle and buffalo, are tanned, with particular complexity surrounding cattle skins given laws banning cow slaughter across the country. Despite these laws and high tariffs on hide but not meat exports, the value of exported hides from animals slaughtered in India is \$3 billion USD, compared to all animal product exports such as meats and dairy equating to \$10.1 billion USD.^{14,15}

In Brazil, slaughterhouses killing cattle in 2020 made \$34.74 billion USD in revenue. Leather sales in the domestic market and through export made up over \$1.1 billion USD, or over 3% of total value. Meanwhile, all beef sales made up approximately 88% of revenue. While it is clear that leather is not the primary product in Brazil, it is the second-most profitable aspect of the industry, and a highly valuable co-product, given it brings in over \$1 billion in revenue.¹⁶ About 80% of Brazil's leather is exported, making the impact of the industry globally relevant.¹⁷

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It is important to note that hides once had a much greater value, accounting for a larger amount of the total revenue made from slaughtering cattle. As Meat and Livestock Australia once noted, after yet another price drop for hides, 'the hide market has fallen further as decreased demand, the increase of synthetic leather, and environmental regulations have an impact.'^{18,19}

As noted by Earthsight, some research suggests that prior to the steep rise of leather alternatives, a cow's hide accounted for up to 8% of an animal's total value at slaughter, and a much higher proportion of the sales value.^{20,21} Reduced hide prices are not a justification for further funding a harmful industry: they are a consequence of this harm, in a society evolving beyond a desire for destruction in the name of fashion.

Should the global leather industry lose the billions of dollars worth of revenue made through the sale of skins,

the impact would be significant. Currently, leather sales effectively subsidise beef production, and by removing this 'subsidy', beef would become more expensive. The more expensive meat becomes, while plant-based meat alternatives become more affordable, the sooner price parity will be met – and this is when the meat industry, responsible for massive ecological, human and non-human harm, will significantly shrink.²² In turn, our planet and those living on it will live better.

Industry overview

The Leather Council states that 67% of skins used for leather belong to cattle and buffalo, followed by sheep (12%), pigs (11%) and goats (10%).¹ It is estimated that less than 0.5% of leather is made from other animals, such as native kangaroos and even domestic species like dogs and cats.¹⁻³

With labelling laws across the globe largely not requiring species identification for leather,⁴ it can sometimes be extremely challenging to know what species has been killed, given the murkiness of global fashion supply chains.

Alongside these sometimes misleading labeling laws, the lack of transparency across leather supply chains may result in a lack of consumer and industry understanding of where leather really comes from. On this topic, fashion writer Lucy Siegle once wrote for The Guardian that "we're comforted by 'Italian leather' stamps, but this could mean that the leather was imported and finished in Italy. I'm fond of saying that if all the 'Italian leather' merchandise was of true provenance you wouldn't be able to move for cows in that country. They'd be drinking from the Trevi Fountain."⁵

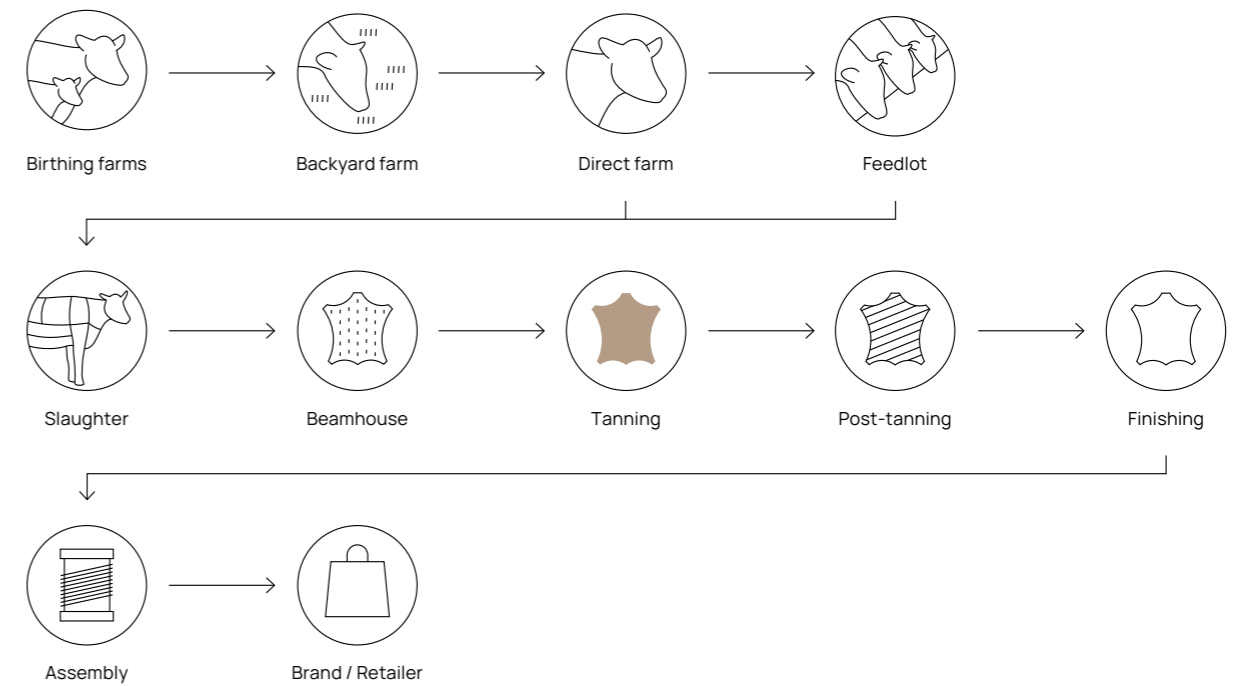
Indeed, Italy is the second largest importer of partly processed skins from cattle ranches in Brazil,⁶ where such production is the leading cause of Amazonian deforestation.⁷ In fact, Brazil is the third most significant producer of bovine skins, with the latest industry statistics citing 40.7 million bovine skins being produced in a single year. Brazil's massive

output is surpassed by China's 47.6 million bovine skins pulled from carcasses in a year, and the output of India, the most significant bovine skin producer, slaughtering and skinning 48.7 million bovines each year. China, Brazil, Russia and India are the major producers of finished, tanned bovine skins.¹

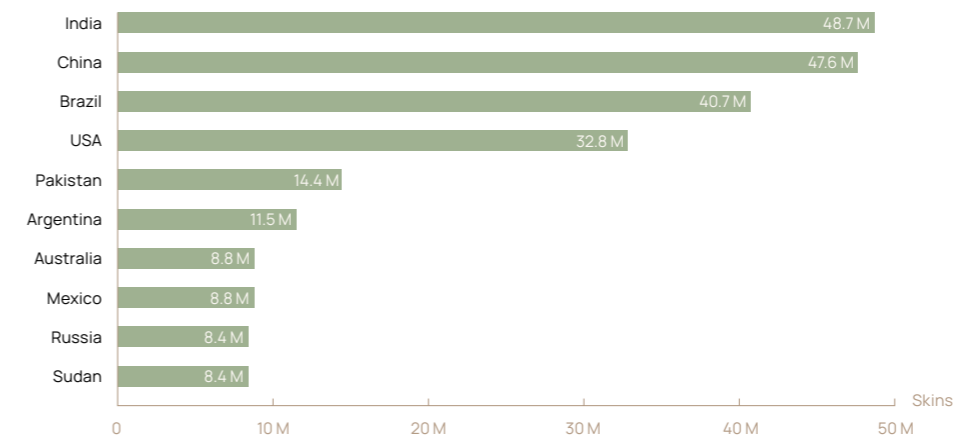
The complexity of global leather supply chains makes it difficult to trace environmental, human and non-human animal abuse and exploitation. Not only does the changing location between cattle farms, slaughterhouses and tanneries make this leather tracing challenging, but so too does the reality of multiple farms and ranches being involved in leather supply chains, due to the use of 'birthing farms', 'backgrounder farms', 'direct farms' and feedlots.⁸

This report will focus on the bovine leather industry across India, China, Brazil, the United States and Australia - as these are all either major production and tannery countries, or countries considered to have 'improved' practices.

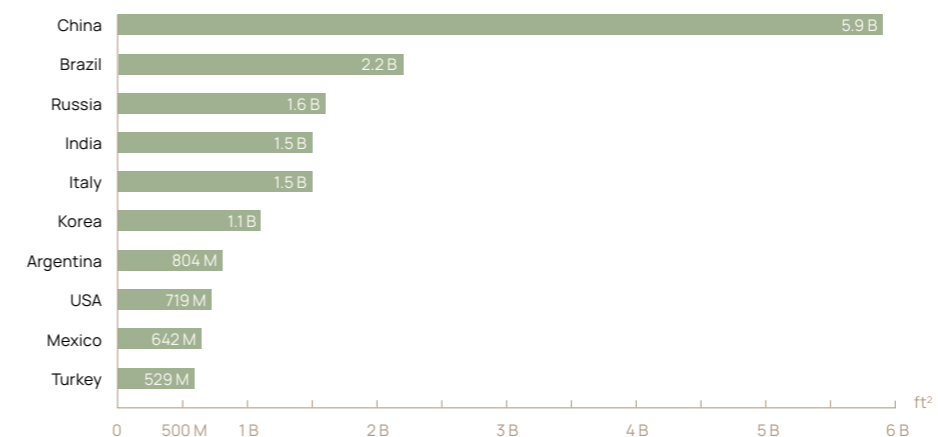
Supply chain



Top cattle hide producing countries*:



Top tanned hide producing countries*:



* (2015, latest available data from Leather Council)

Leather's impact on animals

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Leather's impact on animals

Introduction: animals

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Introduction: animals

Though by the time it has been turned into a bag, a pair of shoes, a belt or a jacket we tend to forget it, leather is skin. Animals, most often bovines like cows and buffaloes, but also goats, sheep, and other species, must be slaughtered and skinned in order for leather production to continue and for profits to be made by those in the business.

While the skins of some animals are now illegal to sell across parts of the world,^{1,2} wearing the skins of bovines is still widely socially acceptable today. Even when laws do not ban particular animal skins from sale, social licences vary: general perception and judgement of cow skin as compared to dog skin sales, for example, is vastly different. This is true despite a total lack of difference in the capacity for these animals to think and feel: as recognised by the 2012 Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, all 'non-human animals have the neuroanatomical, neurochemical, and neurophysiological substrates of conscious states along with the capacity to exhibit intentional behaviours.'³ Consequently, the weight of evidence indicates that humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness.³ Here, these scientists refer to 'non-human animals', as while we have distanced ourselves from this reality, we ourselves are 'human animals'. The human species shares the capacity for sentience with countless other species on the Animalia branch of life.

While factory-farming fur-bearing animals and selling their skins continues to be phased out and banned across the globe,⁴ with designers like Donatella Versace

stating 'I don't want to kill animals for fashion',⁵ the myth of leather as a mere by-product perpetuates the acceptability of wearing bovine skins.⁶ Brands like Versace – and almost all others across the luxury and mainstream fashion industry – are of course both funding and profiting from the killing of animals, regardless of whether or not the slaughtered animal skins these brands use are from animal carcasses which are also butchered for meat sales.

A cognitive dissonance around which animal skins can be acceptably used in fashion and why persists within the industry. At the same time, a growing number of citizen consumers are seeking out clothing, shoes and accessories free from all animal skins. FOUR PAWS commissioned polling across 12 markets shows that over a tenth of people have decided to avoid all animal-derived materials in fashion, since the beginning of the pandemic.⁷ In 2020, Lyst noted that year-on-year, searches for 'vegan leather' had increased by 69%.⁸

This more animal-friendly progress from citizen consumers is positive. However, still today just 14% of the 111 major global brands analysed in FOUR PAWS and Good On You's 2021 annual 'animal welfare in fashion' report had made any sort of ▶

commitment to moving beyond even some animal-derived materials.⁹ Meanwhile, only 57% had a formal animal welfare policy.¹⁰ It is clear that the wellbeing of animals is not considered a priority by many brands, which are yet to recognise the critical need for a 'total ethics' approach to fashion.¹¹ Such an approach recognises that we can no more sustain injustice than we can environmental degradation, and injustices facing humans and other animals alike are critical to confront and evolve beyond.

Despite this lack of consideration for animals by brands, leather has become a more contentious issue in fashion media, with a growing number of articles on its sustainability, impact on the climate and deforestation being released. As is true too within brands themselves, animals whose skins are turned into leather are largely sidelined in these discussions, with an unholistic form of sustainability which does not consider those who live on this planet maintaining media focus.

So long as the fashion industry fails to effectively consider animals: offering up only very minimal or no animal welfare policies at all, avoiding discussion of animal issues and continuing to use animal-derived materials without

consideration of related ethical consequences, we will not make sufficient progress. Collective Fashion Justice holds that the view of sentient animals as commodities to extract profit from through slaughter and skinning can never be aligned with work for genuinely responsible and ethical fashion. In fact, it undermines existing efforts to build a fashion industry that values individual rights, autonomy and freedom. We must move beyond unimaginative thinking, and towards an innovative, boundary-pushing and genuinely responsible fashion system.



Cattle as individuals

Despite the earliest domestication of cattle occurring over 10,000 years ago,¹ the perception and understanding of cattle outside of the framework of their use to humans as sources of food, clothing and labour is limited, with little attention paid to their personalities and emotions.² Much of the scientific literature on cattle psychology and behaviour is also centred around the implications these factors may have for intensive farming (for example, behaviours that impact flesh and skin quality, ease of handling, susceptibility to disease and the ability to grow and reproduce in a cost-effective manner). In a world where cattle

are treated as commodities, we are rarely exposed to narratives that explore their lives as individuals in their own right. However, more research is emerging, highlighting their unique personalities and altering perceptions of these highly social and sensitive non-human animals.

In 2012, the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness brought attention to the reality that non-human animals do in fact have rich mental lives, highlighting ethically important consequences for how we relate to and treat them.³ It is now acknowledged that cattle are sentient beings who are cognitively and socially complex,

experience emotional states, have conscious desires and preferences, and individually demonstrate unique personality traits² – similarly to other animals such as dolphins, cats, monkeys and humans.⁴⁻⁶

Cattle display a full range of emotions including boldness, shyness, sociability, gregariousness and being temperamental.⁷ They are herd animals and form strong social bonds, enjoy play, have awareness of their own actions and their consequences, are able to evaluate others and react to situations that cause them fear, nervousness and discomfort.^{2,7}

Relationships and play



Cattle are highly social and possess a significant level of social complexity, forming lasting social bonds with their offspring and other herd members.² They can visually recognise other individuals, particularly those of their own breed, and the more familiar an

individual is, the more quickly they will recognise them.⁸ Play is also an important part of the lives of cattle and they engage in many forms including playing with objects such as balls, gambolling and running, as well as social play with members of other species.⁹

Awareness of own actions



A 2004 study by Cambridge University researchers revealed cattle are aware of their actions and take pleasure in their own learning achievements. Young cattle were put in a pen with a gate that could be opened by pressing a panel with their nose to access food, and upon learning how to do this, they experienced an

excitement response of increased heart rate and jumping or galloping, also known as the 'eureka' effect.¹⁰ Cattle also have a conscious memory and are aware of how they performed in a recent task as well as how long it took them to complete it.¹¹

Ability to evaluate others, feel pain, fear and distress



Cattle are particularly sensitive to sounds and can identify characteristics of voice reflecting a human's mood.¹² They have even been shown to demonstrate a clear preference for handlers talking more gently compared to handlers who shout at them.¹² Interestingly, cattle and calves can also discriminate between friendly and unfriendly humans, and express fear responses when they come into contact with humans who have previously treated them badly.⁸ When cattle

are in pain they make distress calls, have reduced appetite and are less social.¹³ They also play less when experiencing pain, as do those who are deprived of their needs or placed in negative situations.² Cattle are also able to sense the increased stress of other cattle; for example there is evidence that they can detect the scent of stress hormones present in the urine of other cattle,² and may become more fearful as a result, making situations like transport and slaughter even more distressing.

Cow-calf separation



Cattle feel distressed when isolated, and cow-calf separation practices are a significant source of grief and emotional distress for cows when separated from their calves.¹⁴ Calves separated from their mother have also been known to exhibit a pessimistic response bias in a judgement task similar to that experienced after dehorning, suggesting that calves experience an emotional response to both pain and social loss alike.¹⁴ The maternal bond is very strong and when calves have been hurt or separated from their mother,

they may also go into a depressive state. There have been numerous accounts of cows displaying strong maternal protection behaviours and there are many records of cows travelling several miles on their own to find calves who have been taken from them,¹⁵ as is industry standard practice.¹⁶⁻¹⁹ In a study of cows' reactions to an unfamiliar utility vehicle approaching them and their calf, 99% of cows placed themselves between the vehicle and their calves in a protective manner.²

Despite the various studies evidencing the capacity for cattle to experience a whole range of emotions similar to humans, there continues to be a significant lack of emphasis on improving their welfare unless there is a clear incentive for commercial considerations.



From their perspective: the story of Valentine and Clarabelle

In the global dairy industry, male calves are separated from their mothers almost immediately after birth, as they will never produce milk themselves, and are not worth the cost of milk loss from staying with their mothers.¹ These calves are not profitable alive, and at a few days old many are slaughtered, their soft skins valuable to the leather industry.² Other calves are kept alive for some more weeks, their bodies sold as both veal and leather following slaughter.¹ Female calves are also separated from their mothers when they are still young,¹ and in the meat industry which fuels so much of the world's leather supply, both cow-calf separation and the use of pointed nose rings which prevent calves from suckling while hurting the mother cow are common.³ While calf skin leather is used in luxury fashion, some of the cheapest leather comes from dairy cows who are considered 'spent', their bodies broken by years of annual, repetitive impregnation, birthing, separation and milking.¹ These skins are cheaper as they are likely to be more damaged with age.⁴

The impact of cow-calf separation has been studied more scientifically, but we can also learn from simply observing cattle – as has been shown in books such as *The Secret Life of Cows*.⁵ The story

of jersey cows Clarabelle and Valentine is particularly relevant to exploration of the cow-calf bond, and trauma associated with routine separation.

Edgar's Mission is a sanctuary for farmed animals rescued from industries exploiting them. When Clarabelle arrived at the sanctuary, she was eight years old, and she was pregnant. The team at Edgar's kept a close eye on Clarabelle, counting down the days to her estimated birthing date. It was a surprise to her carers then, when Clarabelle had clearly given birth – her teats engorged – but no calf in sight.⁶

Cautious not to disturb Clarabelle, the team continued to watch her closely from a distance. Over a number of days, they watched as she spent much of her time amongst the rest of her new herd, as though she had not recently given birth. Those watching noticed that every now and then though, Clarabelle would cast a quick glance off into the distance. Then, they noticed that when it seemed to her no humans were watching, Clarabelle walked to the bushes and long grass she kept gazing back at. This is where she was hiding Valentine, her newborn calf.⁷ She would feed her far away, out of view, and then once a day, she would move her calf to a

new and similarly out of sight spot.

It was upon witnessing this unfold that the team of carers at Edgar's understood what was happening: Clarabelle, a cow who had been exploited in the dairy industry for eight years, birthing an estimated six calves who were all taken from her,⁸ was hiding Valentine from them. All of Clarabelle's life experience had taught her that humans took calves from cows, and she did not want it to happen again.

It has been several years since Valentine was born. Unlike so many others, Valentine was not killed. And unlike in Clarabelle's past experience, and the shared experience of hundreds of millions of cows and calves across the world, Clarabelle and Valentine remain together today. The pair will continue to live together for the rest of their lives, which will never be cut short by a profit-driven industry.

While Clarabelle and Valentine's story is unique, their bond is not. Workers separating calves from their mothers in cattle industries are warned to 'look out for aggressive mothers'⁹ – cows who, like Clarabelle, are doing all they can to stay with their young. It is these young who are made into 'luxury' calf skin boots, bags and jackets. ■

Standard mutilations

Neglect is a serious issue on many cattle farms, and veterinary care is often only provided to cattle if it costs less than the profit that can be extracted throughout the value chain and from recovered animals at slaughter.^{1, 2} However, direct infliction of harm is standard on farms and feedlots, too. Cattle exploited in leather supply chains are routinely subjected to painful surgical procedures, largely and legally without pain relief.³⁻¹⁰ Such mutilative practices are generally

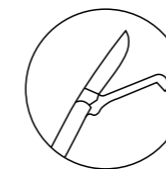
undertaken for economic reasons; to reduce the risk of injury for both animals and workers, to reduce the risk of scratches and damage to valuable skins, and to lessen the amount of care required by the animal, therefore reducing the cost of production.¹¹⁻¹⁵ Some of these painful practices would not be necessary for the animal's (or herd's) wellbeing were they not being raised in intensive farming systems, where they are kept in crowded and confined conditions

which prohibit their capacity to express natural behaviours, or in which the sheer number of cows being raised prohibits proper care.

A number of standard mutilations performed on cattle in the leather industry are routinely undertaken without the use of anaesthesia or analgesia. Pain relief is both routinely and legally denied to animals facing mutilative practices across the globe.¹⁵

Procedure:

Disbudding or dehorning



What it is:

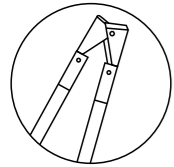
Disbudding is the removal of growing, nerve-rich horn buds before they attach to the skull and is generally performed on calves less than a few months of age.^{15, 16} Dehorning is the removal of horns after they have attached to the skull. Disbudding or dehorning is generally performed by either electrocautery (hot iron), caustic chemical or surgical amputation.¹⁷ 'Surgical amputation' is a sterile term for the use of sharp metal tools which cut into the skin and under or through the budding or grown out horns.¹⁸

Purpose:

Horns are important for expressing natural behaviours, and can be used by cattle to defend themselves or to attack when in stress. This practice is performed to make animals easier to manage, to reduce the risk of unprofitable injury to other animals, and to people working on farms, feedlots and in slaughterhouses, again all of which are significantly increased risks in intensive systems.¹⁷

Procedure:

Castration



What it is:

Castration is the removal of the testicles of male calves.¹⁵ Castration is frequently performed without pain relief by 'surgical amputation', a sharp blade used to slice the skin open and cut testicles out.^{12, 19} Alternatively, a metal device which crushes the spermatic cord or a tight ring that slowly cuts off blood supply to the testicles until the tissue dies is used. All such methods are regularly performed without pain relief, resulting in long-lasting pain effects. While methods such as banding may be assumed to be less painful as they are 'bloodless', this method results in chronic pain.¹²

Purpose:

Castration is undertaken to control breeding and to reduce aggression, insubordination and subsequent injury.¹² It is also performed to improve profitability at slaughter.¹²

Branding

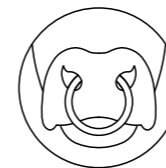


Branding is a permanent mark placed on the skin.¹⁵ Branding is generally performed with a hot iron or with liquid nitrogen, both of which result in a deep and painful burn.^{20, 21} While most animals are branded on their hindquarters, a 2016 investigation between Repórter Brasil and PETA documented the branding of Brazilian calves on their faces.²²

Branding is undertaken for the purpose of identification of ownership of the cow.²¹

Procedure:

Nose piercing and ringing



What it is:

Nose ringing is the piercing and insertion of a large ring in the nose or nasal septum (cartilage between the nostrils) of cows.¹⁵ Rope is also pulled through piercings to pull cattle with, often resulting in painful rubbing and even tearing.²³

Purpose:

Nose piercing and ringing is performed to make management and control of animals easier,²⁴ especially in instances where animals attempt to free themselves from harmful or tiring experiences and demands. In calves, weaning nose inserts (or nose thorns) clamp onto the septum and are used to restrict access to the mother cow's udder and prevent suckling, as spikes hurt the mother cow.²⁵

Tail docking



Tail docking is the removal of the tail. Tail docking is generally performed with a knife or hot knife, with a hot iron, or by using a ring that cuts off blood supply to the tail.²⁶

While tail docking is not a standard mutilation performed on cows, it may be undertaken on dairy cows to improve cleanliness around the udder, which may reduce the risk of mastitis.^{26*}

*Some spent dairy cows are used for cheap, 'lower quality' leather,²⁷ while their male calves are used for calf skin.²⁸

Animal welfare legislation and regulation for bovines

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Animal welfare is, in theory, protected to some degree in all but 1 of the 10 largest cow skin producing countries, under the provisions of specific animal welfare legislation.¹ China, which produces more cow skins than any other country in the world, does not currently have any stand-alone animal welfare legislation.²

However, even in other countries, including those often considered 'more humane', animals reared for profit and production like cattle in the leather industry are routinely and intentionally exempted from the overarching protections and duty of care standards of animal welfare legislation.^{1, 3-12} This results in a global system where many practices undertaken by animal use industries are not subject to any form of enforceable regulation or oversight.

In the United States for example, Connecticut's legislation related to 'malicious or intentional cruelty to animals' states that:

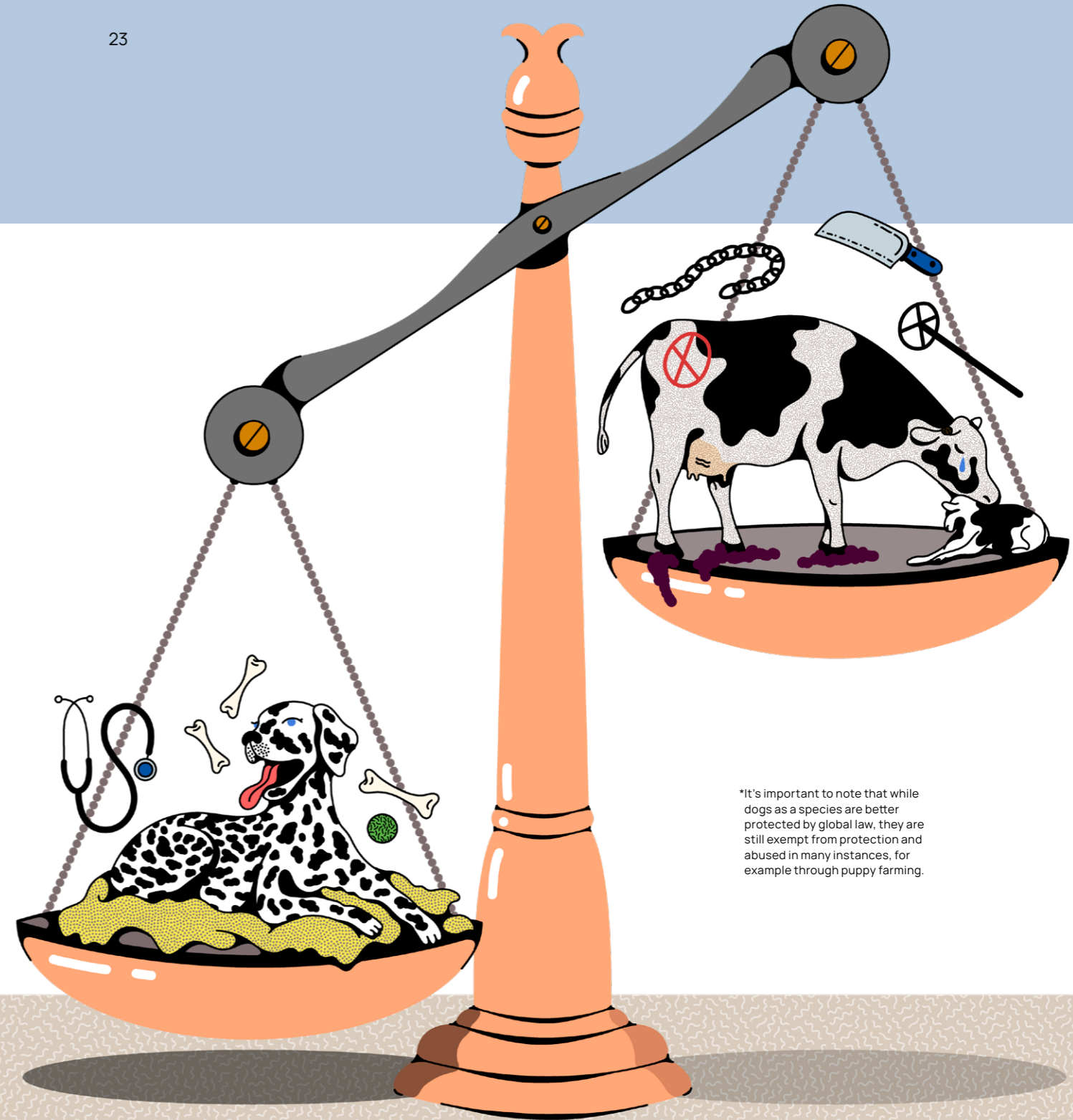
"it is a class D felony for a first offence, and class C felony for subsequent offences, to maliciously and intentionally maim, mutilate, torture, wound or kill an animal. This law does not apply to... persons following approved slaughter methods... persons abiding by generally accepted agricultural practices."¹³

The language used to create legal exemptions for cruelty in the animal industrial complex differs across states and nations, but the results are the same: exclusion of animals such as cattle from legislation which should protect them. Such exemptions exist in all countries, as without them, systems such as those which produce leather would be entirely illegal.

The routine use of painful procedures such as dehorning, castration, tail docking and branding without the use of anaesthesia or analgesia demonstrates the conflict between the use of animals as commodities for economic gain and the wellbeing

of animals. Due to exemptions in animal welfare legislation which allow for the profitable exploitation of animals like cattle for food and fashion, most farmed animals are subject to mutilative practices that would be prohibited if similarly inflicted upon a cat or a dog.³⁻¹²

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*It's important to note that while dogs as a species are better protected by global law, they are still exempt from protection and abused in many instances, for example through puppy farming.

Veterinarian perspectives: how surgical procedures on companion animals differ to cattle considered 'livestock'

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If companion animals like dogs and cats – who are generally subject to far greater protection under animal welfare legislation¹ – faced similar painful practices to cattle, the requirements for pain relief would be starkly different. In fact, even with significant pain relief, many practices would still be considered unacceptable – we do not accept the branding of companion animals for example, instead using collars in this species-specific instance.



Dr Robert Gropel runs his own veterinary hospital and has been awarded advanced practitioner membership in Small Animal Medicine with MANZCS. Dr Gropel has 20 years of experience as a veterinarian. We asked Dr Robert Gropel to explain the difference in pain relief provided to cattle and companion animals, for somewhat similar procedures:

“Both branding and disbudding are similar procedures involving the destruction of tissue with heated metal, and can be used to compare pain relief practices in veterinary practice with animals considered pets.

Disbudding of calves:

When calves are 'disbudded', they are usually between 1–8 weeks of age.^{2–5} At this age the horn is a hard lump of keratin which is rich in nerves and floating in the skin on top of the skull. As the calf grows, this hard 'bud' grows down

and attaches to the skull, reversing to grow up as a horn. While such measures cannot wholly eliminate pain, local anaesthetic, sedation and anti-inflammatory medications are recommended for calves undergoing this procedure, due to the pain and stress inflicted when buds are cauterised using a heated iron, destroying the cells.^{2,4} However, across locations including the EU, Brazil, Australia, and the United States,^{3,6–8} disbudding is routinely performed by farmers or contractors without the use of anaesthetic or pain relief, resulting in significant acute and ongoing pain to the calf.⁹ ¹⁰ Getting the guidance of a veterinarian to provide an effective pain management protocol can be expensive, hence farmers will often perform the procedure themselves to save on costs. An inverse relationship between profitability and animal welfare persists across business, which uses animals as commodities.

Branding of calves:

The process of pushing a hot iron into the skin causes it to melt and permanently destroy the hair follicles. This process is used to brand cattle for identification, and hot iron branding causes acute pain during the brand.¹¹ Pain may remain for at least eight weeks after the procedure, as evidenced

by avoidant behaviour in cattle.¹¹ An injection of the anti-inflammatory drug meloxicam may help to reduce some of the associated pain,¹² however this is not required under a large portion of international law. Even in countries thought to have 'good animal welfare', legal branding without pain relief persists.^{13,14} Freeze branding, sometimes using liquid nitrogen,¹⁵ results in reduced pain during and after the procedure, however this is still indeed painful.¹⁴

Cryotherapy in dogs and cats:

A similar procedure performed in household pets is cryotherapy. Cryotherapy involves applying a very cold substance, such as liquid nitrogen, to an area of skin in order to kill off the underlying cells. It is most commonly used to remove small tumours in the skin.¹⁶

The comparison between cryotherapy in domestic pets and branding or disbudding in farmed cattle lies in the use of pain relief and care given to the animal during and after the procedure.

It would be professionally and socially unacceptable to apply a hot or cold brand to a conscious dog or cat. If a veterinarian were recorded doing this to a dog or cat vocalising in pain as cattle do,¹⁷ they would lose their licence immediately and most likely be charged with an animal cruelty offence.

Cryotherapy is always performed on a domestic animal who is under a general anaesthetic. Even if sedation and local anaesthetic alone were used, the risk of acute pain and stress to the dog or cat would still carry too much risk. In veterinary practice, the animal is given pain relief (such as methadone) prior to an anaesthetic. Once the animal is under anaesthetic and cryotherapy is performed, an anti-inflammatory injection is administered to reduce acute pain and inflammation. After the procedure, the animal is then sent home with at least seven days of anti-inflammatory pain relief.” ▶

Veterinarian perspectives: how surgical procedures on companion animals differ to cattle considered 'livestock'



The contrasting levels of pain relief offered to companion animals and those considered 'livestock', like cattle are not based on science or differences in pain perception, but, as veterinarian **Dr. Belinda Oppenheimer BVSc (Hons) MANZCVS** says, "human practicality".

"While the tissues of cattle have the same basic anatomy and sensitivity as that of a dog, minimal consideration is made to alleviate the impact of a surgery such as castration when compared to companion species, despite an equivalent nature of pain.

Given the invasive nature of the surgery, when companion animal species such as dogs and cats are castrated, there are considerable actions taken to minimise any associated pain or distress. This typically involves the use of pre-surgery pain relief, sedation and anxiolytics to reduce stress, followed by full general anaesthesia while the surgery is performed, infiltration of local anaesthetic agents into sensitive tissues prior to incision, gentle handling of tissues, then further post-operative pain relief and instruction to rest. When castration is performed on a large scale, in species which are traditionally utilised for production rather than seen as companions, it is impractical and not considered necessary to afford the same degree of care.

Castration in animals reared for industrial production purposes is invariably performed for human gain, rather than for any health benefits to the animal, and as a result, the practice of calf castration by laypeople without any form of pain relief is highly frequent. Despite pain relief and local anaesthesia being available to mediate the pain associated with castration, its widespread lack of uptake is likely both an economic and time management decision. The discrepancy between pain relief and anaesthesia utilised for companion animals and production animals is based on economics and human convenience, rather than an inherent difference in capacity to suffer."

Feedlots



Feedlots

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Feedlots are commonly used in conjunction with pastures which raise animals for slaughter in leather supply chains,¹ and are considered a kind of intensive factory-farming.²⁻⁴ It can be difficult to know whether or not a leather supply chain includes feedlots, due to the lack of transparency around background feedlots.^{1,5}

A large portion of cattle across Brazil, the United States, Australia, China, Argentina, Europe and other major skin exporting locations spend at least part of their lifetime in a feedlot.⁶⁻¹² Feedlots confine cattle closely together in unnatural conditions, increasing lameness and sickness.¹³ Feedlots also deny cattle enrichment and stimulation, as well as space to rest and behave naturally, all while worsening eutrophication and soil degradation at feedlot sites.^{14,15} While feedlots reduce the land footprint of leather,¹⁶ this is not an acceptable justification for allowing feedlots in supply chains, given the wide range of other negative factors involved in their use. While, as noted in our environmental report, the leather industry is working to limit deforestation for production, this will likely result in more cattle being confined to feedlots, if deforestation commitments are not at least tied to industry scale reduction commitments.

Feedlots exist to fatten up animals for their most profitable slaughter. Around the world, industry estimates suggest that on average, cattle on feedlots gain 1.5 kg of body weight each day.¹⁷ Transitioning animals from pasture to a diet designed for fast weight gain can cause digestive disorders and acidic imbalance in the rumen. As a result, cows can suffer from diarrhoea,

weakness, a decreased appetite and staggering.¹³ The distress of this sickness can cause teeth grinding.¹³

Cows can spend as much as a quarter of their life in a feedlot, and in some cases most of their life.^{11, 18, 19} Some cattle, like those in Brazilian feedlots, spend just the last 70 days of their life in feedlots, where they are rapidly fattened.⁵ Meanwhile, some calves in the United States are on feedlots from soon after weaning until their slaughter.¹¹ Some of these calves are confined to individual stalls from three days old before being moved to a larger feedlot.¹¹ In China, feedlots holding as many as 10,000 cattle at a time confine these animals for nearly half their life in some instances.²⁰

“Up to 100,000 cattle at a time are crowded on top of their own excrement into one square mile of what can be euphemistically called mud (winter) or dust (summer). From the highway, the stench wallops you like a punch in the face and lingers in your car and clothing (even if you never stop driving) for miles – and in your memory forever.”

— Journalist Barry Estabrook for the Atlantic²¹

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Feedlots vary in size and are split up into smaller penned areas.¹³ Brazilian feedlots generally hold less than 5,000 animals,²² and in China, size varies greatly but most hold fewer than 500 animals.²³ 40% of feedlots in the United States confine over 32,000 animals,⁸ and one of the largest feedlots in the United States holds 100,000 cattle, who are each provided just 16 square metres of space.²⁴ Cows who live on lush pastures tend to walk between 1,600 and 3,000 metres each day – up to 187 metres farther than the length of extremely limited space they are offered in the aforementioned feedlot.²⁵ By their very nature, all feedlots deny cattle this ability to free roam. At feeding troughs, some cattle can be provided just 20 cm of space for each of their heads.²⁶ Away from natural environments, the ground of feedlots can become muddy or dusty very quickly, and are often full of faeces. Lameness, hoof pain and lesions are common due to these factors and often abrasive surfaces.¹³ Heat stress is also common in feedlots across Brazil, the United States and Australia,²⁷ and regulation regarding access to shade and shelter is limited globally.

When cattle are confined with limited access to free space in feedlots, they are at risk of diseases such as bovine

respiratory disease.¹³ This disease is most common shortly after arrival at a feedlot, due to 'compounding effects of stress and exposure to infectious viruses and bacteria'.¹³ As a result, high rates of indiscriminate antibiotic use are documented in feedlots globally,²⁸⁻³⁰ even resulting in antibiotic resistance across species, including in humans.^{31, 32} Hormone growth promotants are also used on feedlots in several top cattle skin producing countries to increase weight,³³⁻³⁵ and these can increase risk of chronic stress.¹³

Brand claims of 'high welfare' in unknown supply chains

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Fashion Revolution's 2022 Fashion Transparency Index found that 58% of the 250 largest fashion brands and retailers had published animal welfare policies.¹ However, these policies mean very little if they relate to stages of the supply chain which cannot be traced by these brands.

Just 12% of these same 250 companies were able to disclose where some of their raw materials are sourced from, meaning most farms and feedlots where cattle are raised remain in the dark.¹ Brands may have policies opposing live export or mutilative practices without pain relief, for example, but without knowledge of where cattle in their leather supply chains are raised, these policies have no impact on those animals. Similarly, the 2021 Animal Welfare in Fashion report from FOUR PAWS suggested that 'most fashion brands still know very little of the conditions faced by animals within their supply chains', noting that these findings did not align with 'community expectations for animal welfare'.²

A large number of major retailers and brands note in their policies or product descriptions that only leather 'sourced as a by-product' may be sold, and that these skins should come from producers using 'good animal husbandry', with such terminology being used by large retailers such as ASOS, Universal Store, Selfridges and many others.³⁻⁵ These policies are both unable to be applied when farm-level supply chain traceability is missing and fail to recognise leather as a valuable co-product.⁶

As a result, such policies also fail to address cruel practices occurring in supply chains these companies profit from. In the vast majority of animal welfare policies reviewed by both Collective Fashion Justice and FOUR PAWS, specific risks facing cattle are generally not addressed beyond this more symbolic stage.

Despite this wide-reaching lack of information when it comes to the treatment of calves and cows in leather supply chains, brands often make claims relating to the supposedly good treatment of animals who are slaughtered for profit.

ASOS, for example, goes as far as to assure consumers that 'any leather you see on the product label is a by-product of the meat industry and comes from suppliers with a good reputation for the care of animals'.⁷ This claim simply is not verifiable, given the lack of information available regarding how skins are sourced, and the cruelty inherent to using animal skins in fashion.

Net-A-Porter's 'Net Sustain' collection of 'conscious' products claims to feature brands that invest in 'good animal husbandry'.⁸ While consumers are told their leather

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purchases from this collection support 'cruelty-free brands', leather pants made from lamb skin are featured in the collection,⁹ from a brand which provides no animal welfare policy or information relating to their sourcing of leather.¹⁰ Collective Fashion Justice believes that referring to any product made from animal skin as 'cruelty-free' is inherently misleading, as there is no way to rear animals for production and slaughter without any element of cruelty.

While policies are fundamental for fashion brands seeking to uphold particular standards of animal welfare and other supply chain practices, such policies often fail to include demonstrated evidence of how brands intend on fulfilling such claims. As a result, these animal welfare policies can have little impact on animals themselves due to both a lack of traceability and specificity. Many celebrated and supposedly more responsible brands make unverifiable claims off the back of these policies. One such brand is Cariuma, which refers to their 'ethically sourced leather',¹¹ despite having a limited animal welfare policy which fails to acknowledge or address many of the aforementioned industry

standard cruelties in leather supply chains, or the way in which animals are slaughtered.¹²

Transport to slaughter

Whether being moved a short distance or across seas, the journey to slaughter is a deeply distressing one for many cattle.¹ Stress associated with close confines within a larger group of animals, handling stress, heat stress, injuries, motion stress, prolonged hunger, prolonged thirst, respiratory disorders, restriction of movement, resting problems and sensory overstimulation are all recognised factors contributing to mental harm for cows who up until their transport to slaughter, have often never travelled by vehicle at all.²

Each of the top leather producing countries have minimum standards relating to the transport of animals to slaughter.³ These standards include requirements such as a maximum number of hours cattle can be denied food and water, and how tightly packed these animals can be in transport. However, as such standards commonly require no more than bare minimum effort to reduce significant stress, even when standards are adhered to, animals being transported are subject to extreme physical and psychological stress,⁴ as well as to potential injury and death,⁵ especially in long distance transport.

Live export

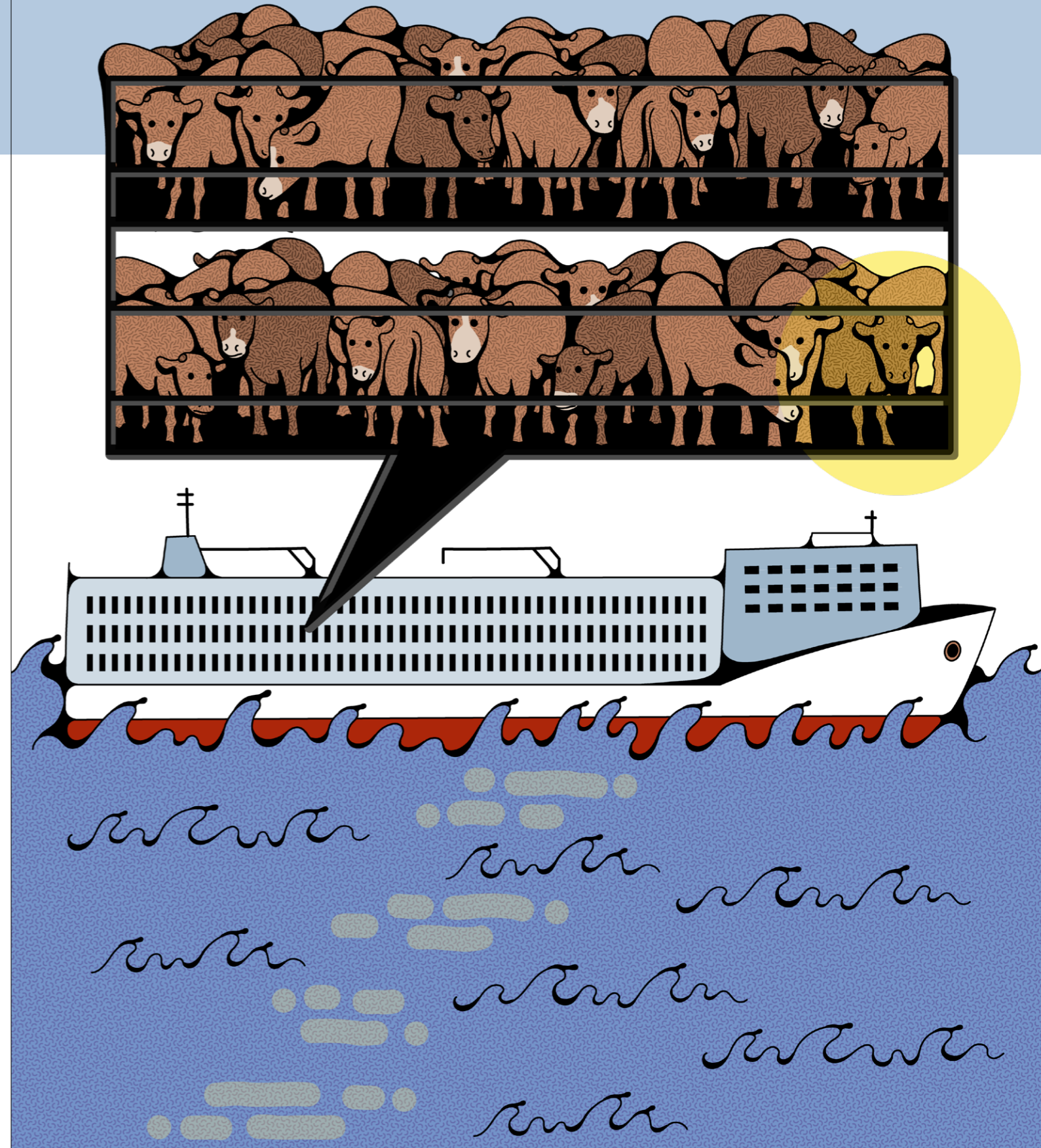
Long distance transport, also known as live export, sees animals spend long periods cramped together on ships. The largest live export ship in the world confines 20,000 cattle at once,⁵ is nearly two football fields long and eight stories high off the water.⁶ Without air conditioning or cleaning on board live export ships,^{7,8} a build up of faeces from thousands of confined animals can become hot and stifling, coating the fur of cows and increasing

heat stress risks.⁹ Animals have been documented suffocating in overcrowded pens, drowning in faeces and even 'cooking alive' in the intense heat.^{10, 11}

"This industry entails unnecessary pain and suffering for all the animals involved within it. Anyone who tells you different is either ill-informed, they're a liar or they're staying silent for fear of losing their job."

— Dr Lynn Simpson, a veterinarian who exposed horrific live export cruelty⁹

Animals on live export ships are treated as though they are any other objects being shipped: "we don't look at the cargo or animal welfare... We look if the ship is overloaded because that affects seaworthiness, but it makes no difference if it's 10,000 containers or 10,000 animals", says Maarten Vlag, secretary of the Paris maritime coalition.¹² In 2021, 1,800 cattle headed from Spain to major leather producer Turkey were left to starve, dehydrate and suffer for so long following a failure to 'unload the cargo' that ▶



200 animals died on board the ship, their corpses thrown overboard. The remaining animals had suffered so long they were considered unfit for consumption and production, slaughtered after unloading.¹² As Thomas Waitz, a European parliamentary representative stated, "ship transports completely fall outside of any regulations or animal welfare standards."¹²

Live export issues persist across the global leather supply chain. Brazil for example, exports an enormous number of cow skins,¹³ but over 200,000 live cattle each year, too.¹⁴ One investigation traced cows raised in Brazil through weeks-long confinement inside large ships, until they arrived in France, Bulgaria and Turkey, where some were then moved on lorries to Iraq.¹⁵ Animals on these ships are forced to stand on hard floors for weeks on end,¹⁶ while those who are crushed amongst cattle and fall over are often trampled to death.¹

While transport standards exist, there is little to no oversight or enforcement. The only documentation of live export revealed to the public has come from undercover investigation work. Even in smaller production countries which may be assumed to treat animals better during transport, injustices have been revealed. Cattle have been

documented not only being denied adequate food, water and space,¹ but facing direct violence. For example, calves exported from Ireland for veal and luxury leather production in France were recorded being beaten, hit in the face and jumped on by workers.¹⁷

The complexity which live export adds to leather supply chains makes traceability extremely difficult. For example, over 615,000 live cattle were exported out of Australia in 2021, with China being a major importer.¹⁸ China is also the most significant tanned hide production country in the world, and in turn exports leather – including plastic-coated patent leather – into Italy.^{13, 19, 20} Leather products made of these processed skins are ultimately labelled as 'Made in Italy' products due to lax labelling laws.¹³ As a result neither consumers or brands know where or how animals have been bred, raised, transported and slaughtered.²¹

Transport by foot

Back on land, cows are not better protected. In India, cows are considered 'sacred' and the majority of states forbid their slaughter.²² While sometimes cows are slaughtered in the country after being reportedly intentionally maimed – in order to receive certification for the slaughter of extremely unwell animals – the majority of Indian cattle in the leather industry are transported across national borders.^{23, 24} The export of cows is also banned in India,²⁵ and due to such prohibitions, cows are illegally trafficked to Bangladesh where they are slaughtered and skinned for leather. While estimates vary significantly, several suggest that from over 1 million to as many as 2.5 million cows from India are illegally brought to Bangladesh each year,²⁶⁻²⁸ where they are re-certified from Bangladesh and slaughtered for a profit.²⁹

Despite the existence of some transport standards,³⁰ cows in India are often crammed into trucks for transport in scorching heat. Due to overcrowding on trucks, some cows can die as a result of injuries or suffocation.³¹ Commercial vehicles crossing state lines are required to pay taxes, so animals are often walked across the border, with some

travelling hundreds of kilometres on foot without food or water.³² To force cows to continue walking beyond exhaustion, cows are beaten, have their tails broken, and have chilli rubbed in their eyes.³³ An investigation by Christian Faesecke for We Animals Media even documented cows being waterboarded until they got up and continued to walk again.³⁴ Waterboarding replicates the sensation of drowning and is recognised as a form of torture by the United Nations.³⁵ These animals are then slaughtered by the road-side or in small abattoirs,³⁴ before skins are distributed globally for use in the fashion industry.³⁶ Leather and leather goods are Bangladesh's second largest export, after ready made garments.³⁶

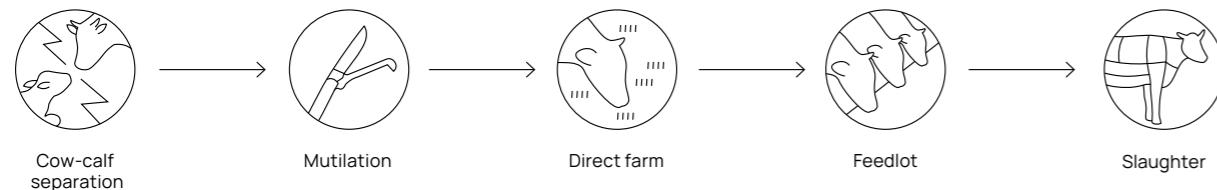
The cow in the room: animals excluded from fashion media reporting

Leather hits fashion media headlines regularly: whether a new brand has released a vegan leather capsule collection, there's a new company claiming their animal-derived leather is 'regenerative', 'low impact' 'carbon-neutral', 'responsible' or 'ethical', or the debate around the acceptability of animal-derived leather is continuing, those in the industry read about it increasingly often.

However, there is a clear lack of attention towards a critical aspect of leather production in the bulk of these articles: animals themselves. To explore the level to which animals and their wellbeing were excluded from fashion media writing about responsible sourcing of their skins, Collective Fashion Justice analysed the three

most popular fashion industry publications (based on an analysis of both domain authority rating and unique viewers per month) which include an article category on sustainability (as without such a category, unfortunately most publications were not talking about responsible fashion considerations enough at all for them to be

relevant to this dataset). These mastheads included Women's Wear Daily (WWD), Vogue Business, and Business of Fashion, and articles relating to leather and alternatives to it published between the beginning of January 2020 and the beginning of November 2022 were assessed.



This analysis found that:¹

Less than ¼ of articles actually mention 'animal welfare', 'animal rights' or even animals themselves

in the context of their wellbeing, rather than as a descriptor for the type of leather being used, or while exploring a related environmental impact such as grazing.

Just 5% of articles explored a specific animal welfare or rights issue for more than a sentence,

with most mentions of animal welfare being no more than a few words.

Of those articles which explored issues facing animals in leather supply chains, two did so while discussing the release of SLAY, a documentary which Collective Fashion Justice contributed to the creation of, one referenced other Collective Fashion Justice work, and the other one highlighted then new investigative work by animal rights organisation PETA. Despite significant discussion around traceability in articles exploring issues linked to leather

supply chains, a lack of knowledge regarding how animals are treated and exploited on farms or killed in slaughterhouses was almost never highlighted. Similarly, a large number of cruel standard industry practices, such as dehorning without pain relief, calf separation, branding, and specific slaughter methods were not mentioned once across the nearly two year period. The most in-depth discussion of the wellbeing of animals in fashion only ever came about due to

external advocacy, rather than due to direct industry engagement on these topics.

The fashion industry must reckon with the wellbeing of animals as no longer an ignorable aspect of responsible and sustainable fashion production: cruel commodification of animals cannot acceptably be sustained, and is woefully irresponsible. ■

Slaughter Legislation on animal slaughter

Globally, there are varying levels of legislation by country covering the process of slaughter, as well as varying levels of enforcement. Although the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH, formerly OIE) has set international guidelines on welfare at slaughter, the guidelines are regarded as voluntary, and are not intended as mandatory standards.¹

Legislation varies considerably across some of the top bovine skin producing countries such as China, Brazil, India, the United States, Australia and in European Union countries, and such legislation includes exemptions which allow for industrialised cruelty.

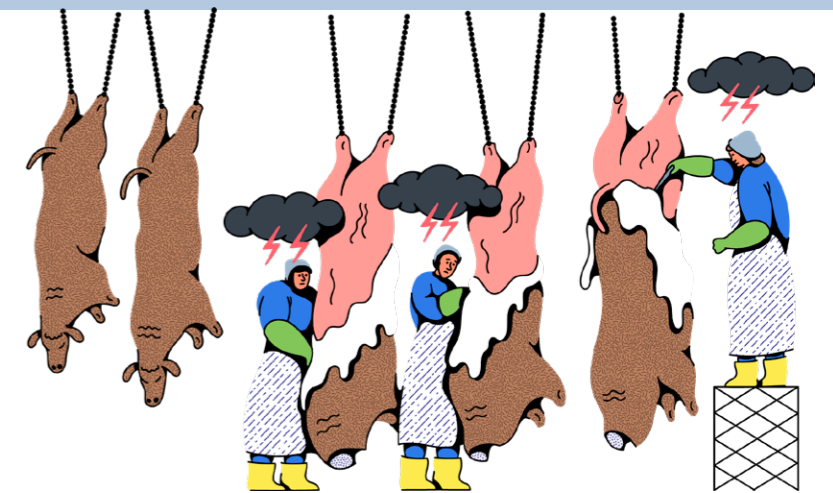
In China, the world's leading producer of cattle skins, there are no legally binding provisions requiring the stunning of animals prior to slaughter.² While in Brazil there are guidelines for best practice farmed animal rearing, transport, and slaughter, these guidelines are mere recommendations and are not legally enforced, often with no prescribed penalties or sanctions for noncompliance.³ Worryingly, Brazil recently introduced the Self-Control Bill which essentially hands over all government inspections of slaughterhouses to the animal agriculture industry itself, enabling them to self-regulate.⁴

In India, the slaughter of cattle is only permissible in eight states. The 2001 Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Slaughterhouse) Rules forbid the slaughter of animals

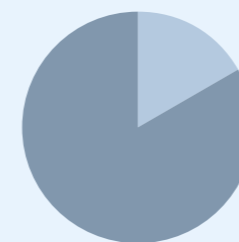
who are pregnant, under the age of three months or who have an offspring less than three months old, or have not been certified by a veterinary doctor that the animal is in a fit condition to be slaughtered.⁵ Killing an animal for food and other production is also exempted from anti-cruelty requirements, as are practices of religious slaughter.⁵

The EU and U.S. have standards covering many of the same issues outlined by the WOAH and both require pre-slaughter stunning, excluding religious slaughter.¹ U.S. regulations also set out detailed provisions in an attempt to prevent inhumane handling and slaughter,⁶ but across the country, numerous legal exemptions release industrial slaughtering practices from animal cruelty laws.^{7,8} Australian regulation requires all animals to be stunned prior to slaughter except in cases of religious slaughter, but there are significant gaps in the Model Code for cattle with regards to humane standards for handling and bleeding,⁹ and similar exemptions from anti-cruelty laws exist for all farmed animals.¹⁰

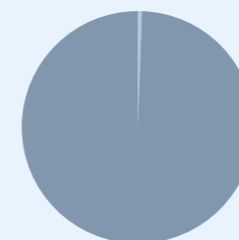
Currently, we cannot assume that legislation is genuinely 'protecting' animals killed for the fashion industry, no matter where they are born and raised. Even in countries with more 'advanced' animal welfare laws and legislation regarding the 'welfare' of animals at slaughter, there is still the same outcome for cattle – death by exsanguination.



Typical slaughter ages and cattle lifespan*



Cattle killed for beef and leather (source of most standard leather):
Between 1 and 4 years old, depending on the country¹⁻⁴



Calves considered 'wastage' in dairy industry (valuable, more 'luxurious' skins):
Less than 30 days, often just 5 days old⁵

* Pie charts highlight the slaughter age of calves and cattle compared to a natural lifespan of 20 years, as a minimum.

Global 'best practice' methods and flaws

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Every year hundreds of millions of cattle are slaughtered worldwide,¹ often under inhumane and distressing conditions.

Although there are recommendations for 'best practice' methods of slaughter, they are often driven by economic interests such as achieving more efficient slaughter-line speeds and preventing meat spoilage,^{2,3} rather than for the specific purpose of minimising inevitable pain and suffering.

Although some elements vary between countries, the main stages of slaughter from when cattle arrive at a slaughter site until their death include: arrival, pre-slaughter lairage and handling, methods of restraint, stunning (excluding some religious slaughter), and bleeding.⁴ There are numerous and significant implications for the welfare of cattle throughout all these stages including temperature stress, fatigue, prolonged thirst and hunger, impeded or restricted movement, social stress, pain, fear and general distress.⁴

Arrival and pre-slaughter lairage

Cattle are not usually slaughtered where they are raised, requiring them to be transported to a slaughter facility, often involving long journeys in cramped conditions with other stressed cattle, and without adequate rest, water or food along the way. As mentioned, cattle often endure injuries from being forced to travel packed tightly together with others. As a result, there have been reports of cattle suffering from debilitating injuries and being killed before even entering slaughterhouses. When injured

animals are unable to move off trucks upon arrival, workers have been documented using prodding devices to force them up.⁵

Cattle arriving at slaughterhouses are unloaded and moved into lairage (holding pens) where they are usually held for between 12 to 48 hours.⁶ This time is also used for pre-slaughter 'health checks', to reduce gut content for easier disembowelment,⁶ and to rest muscles for the sake of improved 'meat quality'.⁷ In this long period, cows are often kept in overcrowded pens and are denied access to food, water and sometimes shelter.⁸ Without shelter, these animals may also be subjected to extremes of temperature, their wellbeing not prioritised by an industry profiting from their slaughter. In the United States for example – where approximately 166,000 cows are dead on arrival at slaughterhouses each year⁹ – cattle were held in freezing conditions at a slaughter facility in early 2022.¹⁰ Ice was documented hanging from their hair and coming out of their nose.¹⁰ Meanwhile in top leather producing countries with extremely hot summers – like Brazil, India, and Australia, cattle can arrive at slaughterhouses in heat stress.¹¹

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Some measures to prevent stress before slaughter may be taken, however, the unfamiliar and inherently violent slaughter environment makes this extremely difficult, if not impossible. Slaughterhouses are often wet, noisy and full of distressing sounds and smells.

[Abattoirs] "are filthy, dirty places. There's animal faeces on the floor, you see and smell the guts, and the walls are covered in blood. And the smell... It hits you like a wall when you first enter, and then hangs thick in the air around you. The odour of dying animals surrounds you like a vapour."

– Confessions of a slaughterhouse worker (BBC)¹⁶

Already likely stressed by the time they are lined up for imminent killing, studies have shown that events at the time of slaughter have the potential to intensify pain responses in cattle.¹⁷ For example, cattle who are injured in the early stages of slaughterhouse processing can experience more pain just before their time of death,

as processes of sensitisation can intensify their pain perception.¹⁷

While the 'standard' stresses facing cattle at this early stage are severe enough, in some instances, cattle are subjected to further especially cruel practices. In China, for example, there have been various reports of cattle being forcibly pumped with water prior to slaughter to increase their weight, in order to fetch higher carcass prices.¹⁸ In 2018, footage was obtained showing cattle kneeling on the ground after being pumped with dirty water and water is seen spurting from their noses after the tubes are removed.¹⁹

Methods of restraint and handling

Following lairage, cattle are moved through the slaughterhouse towards the pre-stunning and restraint area. Unsuitable building layouts from entry to slaughter, along with wet, slippery floors can cause fear and injury, and witnessing the distress of other cattle in the slaughterhouse can, unsurprisingly, result in further distress.²⁰ At this stage, animals are most likely to experience rough and inhumane handling as they vocalise, struggle and kick in an

effort to escape. There are various reports of cattle being abused as they try to flee, including with the excessive use of electrical prodding devices and with beating.^{21,22}

Many inhumane methods are used to force cattle – including those who are sick, pregnant, injured or too exhausted to move – through slaughterhouses.²³ Although it is in the industry's economic interest to minimise bruising and damage to cattle carcasses, there are myriad reports of inhumane handling and excessive use of prodding and goading devices on cattle during unloading and pre-slaughter handling.^{24–27} One commonly witnessed cruel practice includes the excessive use of electrical prods on cattle who are understandably hesitant when entering restraints.²¹ There are even reports of slaughterhouses in India where cattle have been severely beaten or had chilli powder sprayed in their eyes to force them to move.²²

Investigations have revealed instances of severe cruelty in animal handling at slaughterhouses, in both 'developed' and 'developing' countries, often due to a lack of ►

knowledge or training, but in some cases, due to deliberate harm:

A six-week undercover investigation at a Californian slaughterhouse conducted by Humane Society United States resulted in the release of footage documenting multiple incidents of cruelty to cattle, including those unable to walk being repeatedly struck in the face, rammed and dropped with a forklift, and dragged by a chain. One cow was sprayed with a high-pressure hose in an attempt to get her up on her feet while an employee shouted, "Up or die."²⁸

Footage from an Animal Equality undercover investigation in Brazil revealed extreme violence towards cattle during slaughter, including employees kicking animals in the face and twisting their tails, improper stunning with animals fully conscious at the moment of death, as well as cattle having their skin and legs removed while they were still alive.²⁹

Despite strong scientific evidence of the significant capacity cattle have to experience pain and distress, it is clear from the various accounts of continued inhumane treatment, systemic exploitation

and commodification that such evidence is not being used on their behalf.

Stunning

Pre-slaughter stunning – which is not required in all instances, such as when following some religious slaughter requirements²⁰ – aims to render cattle unconscious prior to killing. Animals are stunned either mechanically with a penetrative captive-bolt gun, or with electrical means, such as with high voltage electrodes into the head or body.³⁰ Penetrative captive-bolt stunning is the most common method, delivering a blow to the animal's head.³⁰ Despite being one of the most regulated aspects of the slaughter process, some of the most serious welfare issues occur at this point, even when following global 'best practice' slaughter methods.

Although it is required that stunning always be immediately followed by sticking and bleeding, inadequate stunning is fairly common,³¹ particularly in large-scale slaughtering facilities. Improper use of equipment and a lack of experience amongst slaughterhouse workers are

regularly cited reasons for ineffective stunning,³¹ and captive-bolt guns are prone to technical problems that can compromise stunning.¹⁷ Ineffectively stunned animals may be conscious while their necks are cut, or they may regain consciousness while they are bleeding out and being dismembered, prolonging their death.⁴

'Some of the worst moments during Whitney's years of work were when "cows escaped from the 'knocker box' once their throat had already been slit. They ran on pure adrenaline and fear onto the blood rail and had to be shot". Whitney admitted that every now and then when a cow hadn't "had their throat slit correctly" they would be fully conscious during their "bleed out".'

– Ex-slaughterhouse worker Craig Whitney on his horror when killing cattle³²

This is a global problem, and one which is not exclusive to countries such as India or Bangladesh, where conscious slaughter is frequently

exposed.³³ For example, auditors in United States slaughterhouses reported that in 2004, 'hundreds of thousands of animals were not stunned on the first try' and may have been conscious for two gruelling minutes after neck-cutting.²⁰ Meanwhile, Swedish researchers conducted a study on the efficiency of captive-bolt stunning at a commercial slaughterhouse and found that of 998 slaughtered cattle, almost 16%, or 159 individuals, were inadequately stunned. These were mostly bulls and calves with highly profitable skins, with 17% of bulls showing signs of consciousness.³⁴ Another study found that at German, Swiss and Austrian slaughterhouses, 9% of cattle shot with a captive-bolt gun were ineffectively stunned.³¹

Bleeding

Once cattle are presumed to be unconscious, they are shackled by the legs and hung upside down ready for bleeding, where the major blood vessels of the neck and throat are severed (called sticking) resulting in death by exsanguination.³⁵ If all major blood vessels are not severed immediately, cattle can take over

a minute to die,³⁶ resulting in a prolonged and painful death.

Many of the welfare issues identified at this stage of slaughtering are tied to a lack of appropriate skills and training amongst slaughterhouse workers to recognise unconsciousness in cattle.³⁷ Intense and increasing slaughterline speeds also exacerbate these risks in what are already emotionally and physically challenging environments,³⁸ where workers can easily become fatigued, leading to more errors and further suffering for animals.

Some may be inclined to look at cases of inhumane treatment at slaughter as isolated incidents, however, given the lack of enforcement of legislation and transparency around slaughter practices, these are likely to be reasonably common occurrences in slaughterhouses around the world. In order to cope with the psychological toll of inherently violent work, desensitisation to violence is common in slaughterhouse workers.³⁹ This not only in some cases impacts surrounding human communities,⁴⁰ but also the animals themselves. Brutal 'business as usual' practices which are known to be incredibly

physically and psychologically harmful to cattle continue on an industrial scale,⁴¹ and are inevitable consequences of a system which reduces animals to commodities.

"If compassion were a muscle, this work we did left it weak and atrophied."

– Susana Chavez, ex-slaughterhouse worker⁴²

From their perspective: the cows who escaped slaughter

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The 'St Louis Six' is the name given to an infamous group of young cattle who made national news in the United States after escaping from a slaughterhouse.¹ In 2017, Chico – who has reddish-brown fur and deep brown eyes – ran out of a St Louis slaughterhouse, desperate to escape.

He crashed through an iron fence, broke through two others, and then continued to run through suburban streets. Five other steers (male cattle) followed after him, seeing their chance for escape in him. Police cars and authorities on foot tried to corner them, even hitting them with cars as they tried to halt them. But with wide, distressed eyes and a desperation to live, Chico, along with Roo, Eddie, Houdini and Spirit evaded police and authorities for five whole hours, as a helicopter streaming to national news programs watched over.²

Upon their eventual capture, the animals were taken to a holding yard. Advocates worked for their release, believing that these animals, for all their efforts, should not be sent back for slaughter again. When the cattle were met by those who successfully negotiated their rehoming to The Gentle Barn sanctuary, they were 'breathing deeply and backed into a corner'. These animals were just under two years old, a standard slaughter age in the industry.³

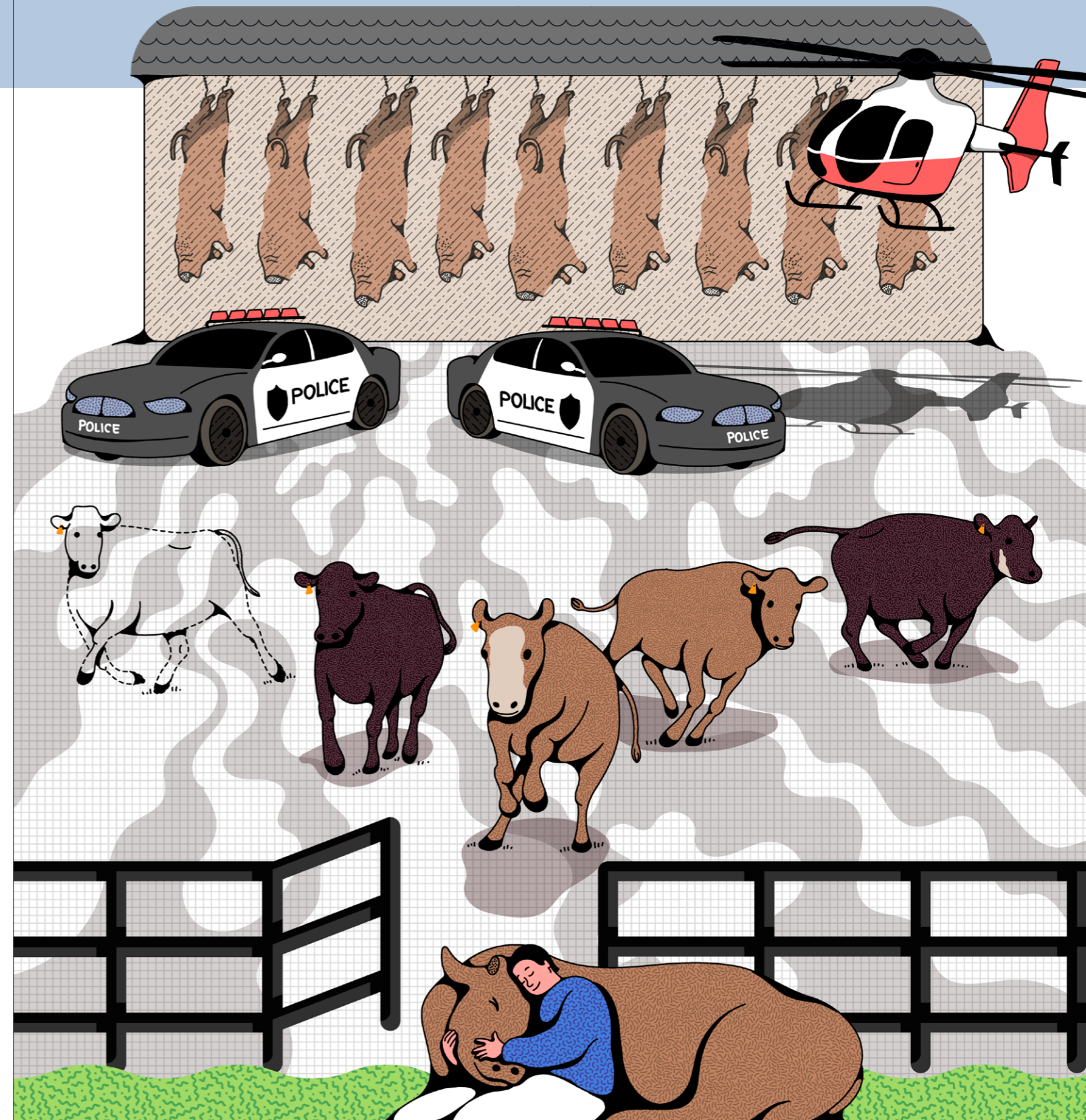
Upon their arrival at the sanctuary, Chico was the most nervous around humans, but grew comfortable and affectionate,

appreciating pats and hugs.

All animals but Spirit, who unfortunately was so badly injured by the time he was safe that he could not recover, remain at the sanctuary today. Chico, Roo, Eddie and Houdini fought for their right to live, and now, they are free to grow old, unlike so many others – others who are skinned and worn as stilettos, boots, belts, wallets, jackets and bags.

When cows are genuinely cared for rather than treated as commodities, they can live for a very long time. In 2022, a cow named Sofie passed away after 37 years,⁴ in the care of Rowdy Girl Sanctuary, a converted cattle ranch which, before a change of heart, sold animals for slaughter, butchering and skinning. When we consider the slaughter of cattle in the supply chains of brands selling skins, we should consider not only the actual slaughter of these animals, but what is lost in their killing. We should consider the lives that could have been lived, that could have been enjoyed. That were fought for in an impossibly imbalanced fight.

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Conclusion

Cattle in leather supply chains face numerous painful mutilation practices without pain relief, distressing treatment on farms and often dangerous transportation before they are slaughtered. The suffering of cattle in leather supply chains can only ever be reduced, never completely avoided.

Both legislation and fashion industry policies which demand pain relief for mutilative practices without exception, which ban live export, the use of intensive feedlots, blunt force trauma killing^{1,2} and other particularly heinous standard practices in leather supply chains can certainly be introduced to limit suffering, but not eliminate it.

In the three largest hide producing countries alone,³ millions more slaughtered cattle are skinned in a year than there are people living across France and the United Kingdom.^{4,5} The perpetuation of a globalised and commercialised leather industry of such a massive scale is in direct contrast to efforts to improve the lives of animals, and therefore any legally accepted concept of 'animal welfare' cannot be achieved by this industry, which prioritises profit and production before life itself.

Further, the existence of fashion supply chains which require slaughter are unjustifiable in the face of available, high quality, more ethical and sustainable alternatives. Fashion brands, councils and events must reckon with their funding of animal mutilation and slaughter, and decide whether drawing a profit from such activities is acceptable to them, or aligned with their commitments to create fashion in a responsible and conscious manner.

Therefore, FOUR PAWS urges the fashion industry to 'reduce, refine and replace' their use of animal-derived leather with more sustainable and kinder alternatives, and strongly recommends that brands reduce the use of animal-derived leather to eliminate animal welfare risks within their supply chain.

In order to achieve a total ethics fashion system,⁶ our view of other species as mere materials must be progressed beyond. While more challenging, and requiring more scientific and culturally-driven imagination for a better future, a just transition away from leather production is a far more effective and all-encompassing solution than efforts for some level of industry reform. But what would this look like?

James Arbib, the co-founder of RethinkX – an independent think tank forecasting the speed and scale of technology-driven disruption – states that while cost and distribution vary the speed, it can take about 15 years for a new product to effectively disrupt a market.^{7,8} Positive feedback loops can allow for such disruption to begin following a tipping point in which 10% of a market is made up of such a new, more sustainable solution.⁹ In the case ►

of circumfaunal (intentionally animal-free), next-gen leather, these materials will not be widely available for another few years, even with existing investment. Nicole Rawlings, CEO of Material Innovation Initiative, estimates that with this in mind, and with a healthy, expected growth of investment in the space, broad disruption will likely occur around 2040.¹⁰

RethinkX also estimates in their agricultural report that by 2030, demand for some cow-based products will have fallen by as much as 70%.¹¹ This shift will greatly help us reach IPCC goals of reducing methane emissions by about one third.¹² Meanwhile, experts suggest that the fashion industry must work to reduce its scale of resource use and waste fourfold in order to stay within planetary boundaries, and these critical calls cannot be ignored.¹³ With this in mind, Collective Fashion Justice views that it is entirely reasonable to recommend the following actions from fashion:

1. Fashion industry initiatives, certifications and media publications, alongside the not-for-profit ethical and sustainable fashion sector, should update their language to acknowledge the harm leather production causes to the planet, as well as the humans and non-humans living here. Terms like 'ethical', 'conscious', 'sustainable', 'natural', 'circular', and 'eco-friendly' should not be used in reference to animal-derived leather.
2. Fashion brands should publicly commit to reducing leather use by at least 50% by 2027, fully phasing out leather no later than 2035. These timelines should be used as conservative targets, with more immediate change being both critically needed and achievable for many brands.
3. In phasing out animal-derived leather, brands should embrace alternatives that shift the fashion industry away from a reliance on fossil fuels, and towards greater circularity.
4. Large fashion brands should invest in the research and development of leather alternative material innovation – ensuring these materials consider the need for a just transition, and will ultimately be

open-source and available for wider industry use.

These recommendations are certainly significant asks of the fashion industry, but their substantial scale is reflective of the urgent need to divest from the interconnected harms of leather production, and from the environmental crises which it perpetuates, as explored throughout this report series. Brands which primarily profit from leather goods will find more challenges in attempting to fulfil the outlined time-based recommendation than brands which include leather goods as one of many offerings. This recommendation should be seen and used as a clear target for what is hypothetically possible for a large portion of brands, should the industry act together effectively and quickly, as it must. For those brands which could not feasibly reach this particular recommendation, serious consideration as to what the closest practical possibility is should be explored and set as a brand-specific target. Immediate action to reduce leather reliance, improve traceability and at the very least reduce the suffering of animals exploited in their supply chains must be made in the interim.

About the organisations

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Leather's impact on animals

About the organisations

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Collective Fashion Justice

Collective Fashion Justice is a not-for-profit dedicated to the creation of a total ethics fashion system which prioritises the life and wellbeing of all animals; humans and non-humans, as well as the planet, before profit. In order for the fashion industry to take a more holistic approach to sustainability – which recognises we can sustain injustice no more than we can sustain environmental degradation – Collective Fashion Justice believes it must shift beyond the use of animal-derived materials, which are built upon the commodification, exploitation and ultimate slaughter of our fellow animals. While a just transition out of these systems is complex, requiring nuance and time, Collective Fashion Justice believes it to be both critical and possible.

FOUR PAWS

FOUR PAWS is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under direct human influence, which reveals suffering, rescues animals in need and protects them. Founded in 1988 in Vienna by Heli Dungler and friends, the organisation advocates for a world where humans treat animals with respect, empathy and understanding.

The sustainable campaigns and projects of FOUR PAWS focus on companion animals including stray dogs and cats, farm animals and wild animals – such as bears, big cats, and orangutans – kept in inappropriate conditions as well as in disaster and conflict zones. With offices in fifteen countries as well as sanctuaries for rescued animals in eleven countries, FOUR PAWS provides rapid help and long-term solutions.

As part of its Wear it Kind programme and based on its almost 35 years' expertise within the textiles industry, FOUR PAWS believes in the power of working collectively towards an ethical and sustainable fashion industry which ensures compassion for all living beings. To achieve this vision, FOUR PAWS is calling for a reduction in the global production and consumption of farmed animal products and for fashion brands to make a timebound commitment to refine, reduce and replace their use of animal-derived materials with sustainable and kinder alternatives to augment this global goal.



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Conclusion

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